Demography & Destiny

Immigration, ethnicity, and the future of America's national and civic culture

Books reviewed by Kevin Lamb

Historian Otis L. Graham reflects in his recently coauthored book *Debating American Immigration 1882-Present*, "We all know that the past shapes both the present and the future, but we rarely appreciate how much the present shapes our view of the past. Responding to changed circumstances, we ask different questions of the history that is behind us, rethink it, bring away different meanings." Graham's point is worth pondering in the wake of the devastating terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001. As details about the culprits emerged in the aftermath of this methodically orchestrated assault, public concerns began to intensify over America's lax immigration policies. Yet the lessons derived from this episode seem perplexing for America's cultural elite. The fictitious mantra that "diversity" is a source of strength for "multicultural" nations continues to mesmerize elitists. However, opinion polls reveal that the vast majority of Americans, unlike the nation's ruling elites, recognize how the lack of immigration reform and lax enforcement of existing immigration laws factored into this cataclysmic atrocity.

Two recent immigration books, *The New Americans* by Michael Barone and Desmond King's *Making Americans*, epitomize the raison d'être of this zeitgeist. According to Barone, a regular panelist on *The McLaughlin Group* and coauthor of the biannual *Almanac of American Politics*, America's greatest national strength is its open practice of accommodating immigrants. The challenges that face America in assimilating large numbers of ethnically diverse peoples, according to Barone, are virtually identical to earlier periods of mass immigration. Barone argues, "Today's minority groups can be interwoven into the fabric of American life, as were the immigrant groups of the past." He attempts to show that the difficulties in assimilating Hispanic, Black and Asian immigrants are no different from the assimilation of Jewish, Irish or Italian immigrants during the early twentieth century. Likewise, Barone dismisses public apprehensions over current immigration levels as groundless "stereotyping."

The New Americans: How the Melting Pot Can Work Again
by Michael Barone
Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc.
338 pages, $27.95

Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of Diverse Democracy
by Desmond King
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
388 pages, $47.50

The argument is a familiar one that has emerged in neo-conservative circles: America is a nation of immigrants, and as such, the U.S. – unlike other nations – should accommodate *with few exceptions* those who seek entry into the United States. Concerns about limits or national origins are viewed as "quotas" that reflect Know-Nothing sentiments. Give those seeking refuge from other despotic lands an opportunity to improve their own conditions and, with the passage of time, they will not only become self-sufficient but also enhance the nation's economic and social fabric. For Barone, the nation's civic culture remains insulated from the pressures of ethnic composition, national origins, or the *magnitude* of population changes. The recent fact about California's population becoming so ethnically diverse that the state's plurality of ethnic minorities constitutes a majority is in Barone's view an illustration of how America has become "multi-grain" instead of remaining

***Kevin Lamb** is a library assistant for* Newsweek *magazine. He is a frequent contributor to* The Social Contract.

a "white-bread" nation. Ever the optimist, Barone constantly notices the silver lining to every gray cloud. Time is on the side of the angels.

In all fairness, Barone makes some candid observations of the various groups he seeks to illustrate, like pointing out that many Hispanic immigrants simply fail to attain middle-class status and therefore remain impoverished. He admits that national character – population traits and cultural habits – remains a frequent impediment to adopting the civic customs of a host nation. Barone tacitly recognizes these national differences even though he dismisses their significance. He also reflects upon the uncomfortable fact that, as a group, African Americans have comparatively higher violent crime rates despite societal attempts to rectify past disadvantages. Although Barone admits that the process of "Americanization" – cultural and ethnic assimilation – has not been flawless in the past, he genuinely believes in the concept of the "melting pot." Over time, the process of "Americanization" triumphs over the bonds of nationality and ethnicity.

However, Barone's acceptance of the "melting pot" metaphor is naively flawed for several reasons: in its crude form, it reflects what Karl Popper once articulated as the "fallacy of historicism" – history will inevitably repeat itself because that which has happened in the past is destined to happen in the future; foreign nationals seeking entry into the U.S. deserve to be admitted because (a) the U.S. is a "nation of immigrants" and (b) their purpose for seeking entry indicates noble aspirations; and considerable population shifts in the nation's ethnic landscape yield little if any detrimental political, social or cultural consequences.

One noticeable feature of Barone's book is its lack of intellectual depth. The book is a refined compendium of neo-con reflections (as proof of Madison Grant's bigotry, he cites John Miller quoting from Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race*); and the only original source cited in terms of references is the Historical Statistical Tables of the Census. McGuffey's Readers seem Spenglerian by comparison. One gets the impression that Barone's book is little more than a careless afterthought to an existing body of neo-con literature on the marvelous wonders of America's immigrant heritage.

In many respects Desmond S. King's *Making Americans* is the antithesis of Barone. As a more informative, deeply analytical and intensely researched volume, the book's focus reconsiders how the U.S. has evolved into what the author calls a "diverse democracy." Although King's underlying argument bolsters the "multicultural" perspective, his impressive and articulately written narrative conveys important lessons for restrictionists: Our ancestors clearly recognized the future perils of a "melting pot" replete with unassimilable nationalities. Much of King's account provides an overview of the efforts behind the passage of legislation just after the turn of the century.

The activities of the Immigration Restriction League, founded by three Harvard graduates, as well as the work of leading eugenicists like Charles Davenport, Harry Laughlin, Lothrop Stoddard, Grant, Henry Goddard, and Henry Pratt Fairchild surface to the fore. King in fact devotes a separate chapter to Laughlin's influence on the legislative process during the 1920s. As previous waves of mass immigration during the late nineteenth century brought a vast range of undesirables to America's shores, public concerns began to mobilize against this alien tide. Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge described "this wave of immigration as one bringing the 'greatest relative increase from races most alien to the body of the American people'." As King points out, even Woodrow Wilson, that advocate of Americanized assimilation who according to Barone rejected immigration limits, shared concerns about the ethnicity of recent immigrants.

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Wilson's fears about racial mixing and about the threat posed by immigrants were of a long-standing character, since he had expressed concern in the 1880s about southern and eastern European immigrants: he concluded that they possessed "neither skill nor energy

nor any initiative of quick intelligence."

In his *A History of the American People*, Woodrow Wilson, then a political scientist at Princeton University, alerted readers to the new source of immigrants manifest in the 1890 census, an alteration which "students of affairs marked with uneasiness." Overtaking the "sturdy stocks of the North of Europe" were "multitudes of men of the lowest class from the south of Italy and men of the meaner sort out of Hungary and Poland, men out of the ranks where there was neither skill nor energy nor any initiative of quick intelligence." To Wilson's watchful eye, it was as if "the countries of the south of Europe were disburdening themselves of the more sordid and hapless elements of their population."

King's point is that progressives and conservatives alike viewed the process of assimilation as bringing together compatible peoples of European ancestry. Unlike Barone, King understands that this emphasis on assimilation applies to America's Anglo heritage. The degree of tolerance and notion of inclusion, which Barone prescribes to Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, and other leading "progressives," is simply distorted. During the first decade of the twentieth century, Congress established a commission to collect and analyze original data on American immigrants. King notes that the commission's findings were comprehensive and that the commission was meticulously thorough in collecting original data on more than three million immigrants. The findings, documented in 42 volumes and published in 1911, formed the basis of further legislative acts to restrict immigration levels.

From the time of the Dillingham Commission to the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924, concerns about the *quality* of recent immigrant stocks elicited the attention of leading eugenicists. The chairman of the House Committee on Immigration, Congressman Albert Johnson, "commissioned [Harry H.] Laughlin to undertake a series of reports for the committee" in which Laughlin produced several reports and provided sporadic testimony to the committee during the 1920s. According to Laughlin, "the character of a nation is determined primarily by its racial qualities: that is, by the hereditary, physical, mental, and moral or temperamental traits of its people." Testifying before the committee, Laughlin argued:

> *The time will come when this country will have to face, more courageously than it has at the present time, the matter not only of race and of individual quality, but also of pedigree or family stock, and we will have to face boldly and courageously the matter of race. It is a matter of conservation of nationality. After the Chinese exclusion act, the greatest step that the American people took in relation to the nationality of race was, of course, the quota laws of 1921 and 1924. It is now clear that the country has in its recent legislation entered definitely upon the biological basis, a farsighted policy, of immigration control.*

The implementation of literacy testing in 1918, the enactment of immigration quotas in 1921, and national-origins quotas in 1929, and the passage of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act allowed the nation, in Calvin Coolidge's own words, "to stop the seepage of aliens" from entering the country. One interesting aspect about the work of the House Committee on Immigration is that all but two congressmen on the committee supported the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act. Rep. Samuel Dickstein (D-N.Y.) and Adolph Joachim Sabath (D-IL.), as King points out in considerable detail, staunchly opposed the measure and became "the leading congressional critics of the new law." Neither hailed from the ranks of what was commonly known as "old stock" Americans. Dickstein, a native of Vilna, Russia, immigrated to the U.S. with his parents who took up residence in New York City while Sabath, originally from Zabori, Czechoslovakia, upon moving to the U.S. settled in Chicago.

The difference between King and Barone's assessment of various issues like assimilation, ethnic plurality, and multiculturalism is that the depth of King's analysis and original research provides a consistently more coherent view of *how* and *why* American society has become so ethnically diverse while attempting to absorb immigrants. Although King and Barone both view America's ethnic "diversity" as an attribute of its democratic legacy, Barone simply rejects what King seems to applaud – a multicultural society diverse beyond the point of assimilation. Barone's analysis reflects a tenuous calculation in the neo-conservative paragon of American society, that as a nation of immigrants, our national and civic character will remain intact provided this ethnically diverse stream of immigrants is assimilated

into America's national fabric. As proof of this successful trajectory, Barone writes off the restrictionists' efforts around the turn of the twentieth century to limit the numbers of Eastern Europeans flooding into the country because they have been fully assimilated into American society. But has this assimilation been all that successful?

Last October 29, as the Christmas season approached, the Kensington, Maryland, Town Council decided to modify their annual tree-lighting ceremony with a more "patriotic" celebration of red, white and blue lights in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks. The noticeable change in this year's "patriotic" decision was the omission of the ritual lighting by Santa Claus from the top of a local fire engine. Kensington's town council rejected the inclusion of a menorah after two residents, critical of Santa's involvement, proposed altering the traditional lighting ceremony. As a result, the town's four-member council decided to drop Santa from the lineup. Since the decision caused a firestorm of protest, the ensuing backlash prompted Kensington officials to reverse the council's ruling putting Santa back in the ceremony. Perhaps this is what Barone has in mind when he points to the euphoric success of America's "melting pot."

One wonders if Barone, or even King for that matter, comprehends President Theodore Roosevelt's warning that, "the one absolutely certain way of bringing this nation to ruin, or preventing all possibility of its continuing as a nation at all, would be to permit it to become a tangle of squabbling nationalities." •